TITLE: Political Instability: A Psychological Perspective

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POLITICAL INSTABILITY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Helene L. Boatner

As I was reading (b)(3)(c) preceding article,* two light bulbs popped. The first, which lit up when I read his comments on "implicit promises and bargains," said: "This is a genuinely original thought." And those of us who pursue truth and wisdom daily in the Intelligence Directorate know that even there—in an environment where ideas are important and intellectual endeavor is prized and praised—a genuinely original thought is rare and deserves to be treasured.

Even as I was savoring the idea, the second light came on. This one said: "I've heard something like that before, in the Levinson Seminar. Only he called it the psychological contract." Perhaps I can make a small contribution of my own to our work on political instability by explaining what a psychology-based course for CIA Senior Intelligence Service (SIS) officers has to do with indicators of political instability in the Third World.

The Levinson Leadership Seminar is a one week course that was first offered to senior CIA executives about ten years ago; it has since been incorporated into the training program for new SIS officers. Harry Levinson, the Ph.D. psychologist who created it, runs the Levinson Institute and specializes in applying psychological concepts to management situations. When I took the course in December 1978, it made an immense impression on me—and on most other Agency officers who took it—because the concept of an invisible contract between the Agency and its employees, and the consequences of an apparent breach of that contract by either party, seemed so timely.

For those who cannot quite place December 1978 on the historical continuum, it was a time when the Agency was reeling from several traumas. We had survived the separate investigations by the Church and Pike Committees of allegations that the Agency was guilty of a variety of abuses. Eventually, of course, even Senator Church conceded that CIA was not a "rogue elephant." But a lot of us were uncomfortable with revelations of plans made or actions taken by individual Agency officers that we felt were wrong—assassination plots, drug experiments, and the like. So we were a little bit disillusioned about the Agency—or, more accurately, a few of its former officers.

That was, however, only one of our problems. The investigations themselves had been immensely painful. The Agency had been subjected to public attacks on virtually a daily basis by members of Congress, by staffers, and by the press. Many officers—especially those with teen-aged children—faced

* "Some Thoughts on Political Instability," by (b)(3)(c) *Studies in Intelligence*, Volume 32 number 1.

suspicion and accusation from within their own families. Professionally, we were inundated with questions from both investigating committees that involved endless hours and major issues of "sources and methods." The time it took us to resolve such questions made our answers slow to arrive, stirred suspicions on the Hill, and brought on more trouble. In short, we had not been having fun. There was, nonetheless, a sense that we were all in "it" together—an unspoken, but shared understanding that we as individuals and the Agency as an institution stood together in the face of the attack from outsiders who were not "witting" and therefore somehow not fully responsible.

Then (in March 1977) Stansfield Turner arrived on the scene. He was Director, and therefore fully informed, and therefore someone whose respect and regard we wanted. He was also well qualified for the job. We expected him to become one of us and to join "us" against "them." He didn't. During his confirmation hearings, he went on record with his suspicions of the Agency and particularly of some of its covert activities. Once on board, he or his staff took a number of small but symbolic steps that were seen by many in the Agency as evidence of his distrust—for example, making it difficult to obtain an appointment with him. He seriously considered dividing up the Agency—removing the analysis function and incorporating it into a new organization—before backing off on what was widely seen as a threat to "dismember the Agency." In August 1977, he decided to move forward on a reduction in the size of the Directorate of Operations (DO) proposed by others. He eliminated [redacted] slots, out of a total authorized 1977 strength for the DO of [redacted] although many of the slots were empty and the number of personnel directly affected was much smaller. More important in terms of impact, I believe, was the fact that he decided to make the reduction a matter of public record. He held a session in the auditorium to announce his plans; he announced the decision to the press as well. Subsequently, he moved to make changes in the personnel system that were seen as a thinly veiled attempt to impose a Navy personnel structure on the Agency, including an "up or out" philosophy.

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Turner, for his part, had encountered a number of situations during his early months that no doubt led him to conclude that Agency officers were not as uniformly loyal and trustworthy as we had come to believe. Shortly before his arrival, Edwin G. Moore, who had worked both in the DI and in Logistics, made an inept attempt to offer his services to the USSR—throwing an envelope containing several documents, including a copy of an old Agency telephone book, across the wall of the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street as evidence of his *bona fides*. In April 1977 John Stockwell, a former DO officer who had served in Africa, wrote an "open letter" to the DCI for publication in the Washington Post accusing DO officers of poor management and corruption. A former DO contract agent, Edmund P. Wilson, was found to be working for the Libyans and getting some assistance from two active Agency employees. A DI analyst who claimed that Agency analysis on arms control issues was being politicized had taken his case—out of channels—to a Capitol Hill staffer, among others. Frank Snepp, an ex-employee writing a book on his Agency experiences, promised Turner he would submit it for prepublication review and then failed to do so. He accused senior Agency people of badly mishandling the evacuation of Saigon. Another ex-employee—William P. Kampiles, who served briefly in

the DI's Operations Center—was arrested in August 1978 for selling a reconnaissance satellite manual to the Soviets. And personnel still working in the Agency obviously were reacting to Turner's internal personnel and organizational moves by leaking their own version of various events to the press.

What we all realized so vividly when we began listening to Levinson and his associates talk about the invisible contract was that we were now understanding for the first time why the emotional reaction within the Agency to the events of the last several years was so intense. The strongest feature of the invisible contract in CIA—a contract to which we had all subscribed without realizing it—was mutual loyalty, among employees, between employee and Director, and between the organization and the individuals. One aspect of loyalty was that "the Agency took care of its own"—not by retaining personnel who were no longer needed or no longer up to the job, but by going to great lengths to protect their dignity and sense of self-worth. Agency people, by the same token, stood up for the Agency and its leaders in public, even when they harbored some doubts. The promise of mutual loyalty included the understanding that a competent and reliable employee could look forward to a career in the Agency, not just a job for a while. It included the obligation to keep silent in public about the Agency's business, no matter how unfair the attacks or inaccurate the stories. It included a commitment to truthfulness among ourselves and trust in the integrity of all parties.

That contract had been shattered. And Agency employees were thrown off balance—not just because the organization had failed to honor fully its obligation of loyalty to some employees, but because all of us were in some measure now withholding from the Director and the organization a portion of the loyalty we felt that they were due. We had "lost" the Agency of our expectations and had nothing with which to replace it.*

What makes all of this potentially applicable to the issue of political instability is that we were, in the psychological model put forth by Levinson, reacting very typically to grief—to the loss of something dear and familiar. According to Levinson and his associate, Dr. Ralph Hirschowitz of the Harvard Medical School, there is a fairly standard pattern of reactions to grief—to loss—through which individuals AND GROUPS tend to pass.

> "After the onset of the crisis [breach of contract], there is a period of life disorganization. Then, depending on individual coping strategies combined with outside interventions, comes a period of life reorganization: dependence will shift to independence, denial to realization, and identity disruption will come to a halt, and identity consolidation, in a new form, will occur.
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> "This 'grief sequence' can apply to the loss of a job, the loss of a marriage, or some other important change. There is always the

* It may be that the public controversies stirred up—in particular the publicity given to the reduction in force in the DO and the retaliatory leaks of anti-Turner rumors by Agency employees—also undermined the invisible contract between retirees and the organization. This could, I believe, account in large measure for what appears to be the increased propensity of some Agency annuitants to "go public" about the Agency; it dates from the same period.

possibility that people will conclude mourning and move to a new consolidation. There is also the possibility that the downward spiral will continue, uninterrupted and without a resolution; the end will be serious, long-term disorientation or death."

Application

Each of us, listening to this sequence and to illustrations of the various behaviors in real-life crises, could recognize the applicability of the pattern to our own personal experiences and to the reaction of the Agency as an entity. There really was a distinct living organism, complete with personality and behavior and emotions, that could be referred to as "Agency society" just as one might refer to "Egyptian society." And that organism really was going through all the predictable stages of an emotional loss—disorientation, denial, acceptance, and a new beginning.

My hope is that political analysts will be intrigued enough by (b)(3)(c) proposal to try hard to define the psychological contracts or implicit promises in the countries they study and to test the applicability of the "grief cycle" to past and present cases of abrupt political change to see if this insight from organizational psychology is applicable.

If so, the psychological theory offers us not only a way to ask questions about the consequences of instability (is the government of X on the verge of breaking an important implicit promise?) but a way to analyze the results: Is the period of disorganization over? Has the situation moved from denial to realization? Is identity consolidation taking place? If not, what events might trigger the end of a destructive period and the beginning of reconstruction?

Certainly the general pattern of loss and recovery appears to have been followed in at least two recent cases—Iran and the Philippines. Both seem to have moved through disorganization to the early stages of identity consolidation fairly quickly, although the process is not complete in either case. In Hirschowitz' terms, a return to the downward spiral remains possible. The case of Lebanon may offer an example of the alternative outcome—a case in which the collapse of a network of implicit promises has effectively shattered the underlying institution, so that no new beginning is possible.

This article is classified SECRET.